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National Organ/Tissue Donor Awareness Week

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National Organ/Tissue Donor Awareness Week Slated for April 16-22

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Two IWU Alumni Play Key Roles in Illinois Organ Bank

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IWU Faculty Family Recalls Organ Donation

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.—Eleven people in the United States die daily waiting for an organ transplant. Every 16 minutes, someone is added to the national waiting list.

The Chicago-based Regional Organ Bank of Illinois (ROBI) reported that more than 68,355 people across the United States—and 4,088 men, women, and children in Illinois—were waiting for an organ transplant as of Jan. 1, 2000.

National Organ/Tissue Donor Awareness Week will take place April 16-22.

The Bloomington/Normal area is targeted by Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White as one of four Illinois cities where special efforts are being made to spread the word about organ donations. "Life Goes On In Bloomington/Normal—Be An Organ/Tissue Donor" is one of the many messages connected with the national awareness week.

Two Illinois Wesleyan University alumni are employed by ROBI as organ recovery coordinators: Ruth Keith, a 1981 nursing graduate, and Lana Casica, a 1995 nursing graduate. Their responsibilities include talking to families about organ and tissue donations, facilitating medical tests to determine suitability and compatibility, coordinating the surgical organ recovery, and arranging transportation of organs from donors to transplantation sites.

And, an IWU faculty member and his wife have first-hand experience as an organ-donor family. Bill Walsh, associate professor of business administration, and his wife, Paula, community relation's coordinator at OSF St. Joseph Medical Center in Bloomington, became an organ-donor

family, when their 18-year-old daughter, Shannon Colleen, was killed in an automobile accident in August, 1998.

"We have found comfort in the process of being a donor family," wrote the Walsh family—Bill, Paula, and son, Brent. "We know that life goes on for two families—one, a gentleman in California, and the other, a woman in West Virginia.

"Both are alive and well because of Shannon's personal decision to become an organ donor," the Walsh family added.

The Walsh family had discussed the importance of organ donation, especially when their children received their drivers' licenses.

"Shannon took it for granted that this [organ donation] is a thing she would do," Paula Walsh recalled. "She felt that you get your license and you become an organ donor."

Illinois has the largest donor registry in the United States, with more than 4.5 million people indicating a desire to donate, according to the Illinois Secretary of State's office.

"In fact, the statewide average for the registry recently reached an all-time high with more than 45 percent saying yes to donation," according to the Illinois Secretary of State's office. "That is a remarkable increase from the 22 percent statewide average in December, 1992."

The Bloomington/Normal Driver Services Facility is one of 85 such operations reaching the 50 percent or better mark, the Secretary of State's office reports.

"We are pleased with the registry numbers," said Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White. "When we see increases, we know that more and more people are thinking about donation and want to help someone else live a longer and healthier life."

To show intent of being a potential organ/tissue donor, anyone—of any age—may sign a Uniform Donor Card. Donor cards are available from ROBI and the cards also are printed on the back of Illinois and Indiana drivers' licenses and state identification cards. Those under age 18 must have a parent or guardian serve as one of the two required witnesses. If a person changes his or her mind about organ/tissue donation after signing a Uniform Donor Card, he or she can simply tear up the card or write, "Void," on it.

Uniform Donor Cards offer three options: Donate any needed organs and tissues; donate specific organs and/or tissues, and donate the entire body for medical study.

Paula Walsh points out that Illinois has a high percentage of people signed up to be organ donors, but the percentage drops off considerably at the time of an accident. Consequently, she said, a focus of National Organ/Tissue Donor Awareness Week should be family conversations about the subject.

"At the time of an accident," Paula Walsh explained, "is not the best time to have a first discussion of this subject."

If people have talked about organ or tissue donation ahead of time, advises Keith, "they are more in control" and better able to cope with their grief, knowing what their loved ones would want.

Casica explained that the major message of donor awareness week is that family members should talk to each other ahead of time about their wishes to be an organ-tissue donor. She added that many families regard organ or tissue donations as a way for part of their loved ones to live on and continue to help others as they did while they were alive.

Keith, who has been involved with organ and tissue donations for about 14 years, said, "It's a very humbling experience. I don't take a single day for granted.

"Our first focus," she added, "is helping recipients and saving lives. It's very rewarding working with donor families, reaching out to them, and turning a tragedy into a positive outcome."

Numerous activities will take place nationally during National Organ/Tissue Awareness Week, including informational promotions such as radio and television spots, rallies, newspaper articles, health fairs, and workshops in hospitals. Professional medical groups and student nurse associations will help to spearhead these efforts.

Organ donors typically are healthy people who have suffered a life-ending trauma to the brain and have been declared brain dead. In this condition, brain function has permanently ceased, but the lungs and heart continue to function with the use of mechanical devices. Tissue donors are those individuals, previously in good health, who have experienced cardiac death, meaning the heart and lungs have permanently stopped functioning. Organ donors may also be tissue donors.

Among organs that can be transplanted are kidneys, liver, intestine, heart, lungs, pancreas, while tissues that can be donated are corneas, heart valves, saphenous veins, skin, and bones. Preservation times for various organs and tissues vary from four to six hours for hearts and lungs, to 48-72 hours for kidneys, to 10 years for heart valves.

ROBI, chartered in 1986, is a not-for-profit organ-procurement organization, one of 63 such operations across the United States. ROBI is responsible for facilitating the recovery, preservation, and compatibility testing of organs and tissues in Illinois and northwest Indiana. It serves three-fourths of Illinois and Lake and Porter counties in Indiana.

ROBI works with other organ-procurement groups through the United Network for Organ Sharing, the federally mandated registration center for organ-transplant candidates in the United States. This computer-based tracking system helps match donated organs with patients in need in accordance with U.S. guidelines. ROBI reports that about 20,000 organ transplants were performed in the United States in 1998 and 857 in Illinois in 1999.

ROBI has offices in Chicago, Champaign, Normal, Peoria, Rockford, and Springfield. It can be reached, toll-free, at 1/800/545-GIFT (4438).

Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White is an organ-transplant supporter. His sister, Doris Ivy, waited three years for a kidney transplant.

"I know from personal experience," White said, "the importance of organ donation. Unfortunately, we often don't take the time to get fully educated about this issue until it affects someone we love. I'm thankful my sister was given a second chance at life and I hope to help more people understand the importance of organ and tissue donation."

Those interested in becoming part of the organ-donor registry and those wanting to become a donor should call, toll-free, 1/800/210-2106. Forms also can be obtained at local driver services facilities or by visiting the Illinois Secretary of State's web site at www.sos.state.il.us.

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Editor's Note: For more information about the Regional Organ Bank of Illinois, contact: Ruth Keith or Lana Casica, organ recovery coordinators, at 309/454-5999 or 309/655-2749.

| [Top of Page](#) |
